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OVERLAND TRIP TO CALIFORNIA IN 1850

BY J. M. STEWART.

[Read before the Los Angeles County Pioneers Sept. 3, 1901]

Fifty-one years ago, on the 22nd of March last, five young men left their homes in Central Wisconsin on a trip overland for the gold mines in California, of which we had been reading some favorable accounts, yet knowing very little of what we might expect on a journey of 2,000 miles, mostly through a country partially occupied by hostile Indians, with only one settlement of white men between the Missouri river and the western slopes of the Sierra Nevadas—that at Salt Lake; but as others had successfully made the journey the previous year, we felt equal to the undertaking.

I was the youngest of the party, being twenty-two years old, the eldest twenty-seven. Our route through Wisconsin and Iowa to Council Bluffs direct, was through a partially settled community, but through Western Iowa, where are now found large towns and cities, we saw the bare prairies only.

On the 19th of April, 1850, we crossed the Missouri at the Mormon winter quarters of three years before, and near where is now the flourishing city of Omaha. Our route was the Mormon road to their settlement in Utah. Like most other emigrants in those days, we thought the only safe way to travel was in large companies for protection from the wily Indian. So we joined a company of 150 men with 45 wagons, and stuck together just three days. As our outfit consisted of eight American horses and two wagons, we did not wish to go into camp after making only 15 or 20 miles, as many of the ox teams did, but we wished to make the trip inside of three months; and to do so we must make an average of twenty miles for every day, so when the ox-drivers commenced to un-yoke, we kept on with a few companions for six or eight miles, and encamped on the famous Platte. The bed of this stream being composed largely of quicksand, renders it almost impossible to ford, except in favorable places, and the water only a few inches deep most of the way, is difficult to navigate with boats. Had it been necessary to cross here, as we expected

to do, the only way would have been to wade out a mile or two to deep water, and there establish a ferry. But the animals must not be allowed to stop even for a few minutes, or they would sink out of sight. We kept the north side, and did not have to cross till we reached Fort Laramie. Some one of our company asked the question, "What was such a river ever made for?" But so far as I know, never got a satisfactory answer. Two days' travel from this point brought us to Loupe Fork, a stream 600 feet wide, on April 26th. Like the Platte, this was a difficult stream to cross, but after a hard day's work we encamped on the right bank; saw a few friendly Indians, but all they said or did was to beg for tobacco. About this time, at the close of one of the warmest days we had, dark and heavy columns began to rise from the southwest, indicating a severe storm. At sundown the wind commenced blowing, and soon changing to the northwest, it blew a perfect gale for several hours. We exerted our best skill and strength in attempting to keep the tent over us, but all in vain. We crept into the wagon to escape the fury of the blast "and wished for the day." Fortunately for us, no rain fell during the night, but it was extremely cold. When the morning dawned we found that we were not alone in our misery, for not a solitary tent was standing on the ground. For a week or ten days, commencing with April 28th, our road was through a territory burned over, or the dry grass the n burning, the fires having been set by emigrants ahead of us through carelessness or neglect to put out their camp fires. This was a great hardship, for our horses had nothing to eat but a little grain from the wagon. On this burned territory, black and dreary far as the eye could reach, we met our first buffalo, many of them with hair completely burned off, and entirely blind. We were obliged to kill eight or ten to keep them from running into the teams. One night we heard the most unearthly noise you could imagine. It was one entirely new to me, but some of the boys more used to frontier life said "Prairie wolves," and that probably there were not more than three or four of them, but I thought there must be a thousand.

May 4th. We have succeeded in getting ahead of the fires, but they are raging in the dry prairie grass behind us, to the right, with inconceivable fury. Today we passed the grave of a man from Iowa who died four days ago; the first fresh grave we have yet seen on our route, but have passed many bearing date of '49, nearly all of which had been opened by the wolves,

with occasionally a stray human bone lying about the opening, the only exceptions being those which their friends had taken the precaution to cover with large stones. The following day was Sunday, and as there was dry grass for the horses, we laid by to give them and ourselves a day of rest. Away to the south and west was a beautiful valley, extending at least four miles, to the very banks of the Platte, and over this vast area were innumerable buffalo feeding leisurely all day long. It was by far the largest herd we had seen, and by a careful estimate there must have been at least 4,000, with wolves and antelope in large numbers scattered here and there among them. One of the latter was brought into camp by two of our expert hunters, and we enjoyed a royal feast. Choice steaks from a buffalo calf were very acceptable and much sought for(but the meat from the full grown animal was not to our liking, being too tough and of an undesirable flavor. Some of these old fellows are hard to kill, and one I saw die only after 18 rifle balls had been shot into him at short range. On the 9th we had rain, the first since we crossed the Des Moines back in Iowa, nearly six weeks ago. And here we found the first green grass of the season. Saw many Indians of the Sioux tribe, all kind and friendly. Passed "Chimney Rock" on the 11th, situated on the south side of the river, resembling a steeple or chimney, 200 feet high, and visible at the distance of 40 miles. This is one of the main landmarks for the California-bound emigrant who travels on either the north or the south side of the Platte.

On the 13th we came to timber, the first we have seen on our side of the river, save one lone tree, for 200 miles.

Like all others who travel that road, we had to resort to buffalo chips for fuel to cook our daily meals, and they proved a good substitute. The next day we reached Fort Laramie, after crossing the Platte on a good ferry. It is 522 miles from the Missouri river, and we were 22 days traveling this distance, averaging 24 miles per day. After first striking the Platte our route was an unbroken level as we followed along the river bottom most of the way, but when the bluffs came down to the river, as we found they often did, sometimes for miles together, our only alternative was to pass over them, where the road was invariably a deep, heavy sand. The valley is several miles in width from the river bank to the sand hills, and has a rich soil. Our grain being gone, we exchanged the heavy wagon at the fort for a pack horse, and with the light wagon and two horses packed with 300 pounds of flour, started on our journey up the south side of the Platte.

Our road lay during the day over high, steep bluffs and through deep ravines, as we are now ascending the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The night set in dark and rainy. To add to our troubles, one of our men who had been ailing for several days, was taken down with mountain fever. We nursed him in the tent by night and carried him in the wagon by day. Eleven days afterwards he was sufficiently recovered to surrender his couch to another who was attacked by the same fever. Two days after leaving Fort Laramie, we re-crossed the Platte on a ferry, and the first 20 miles was over heavy sand. A week or so later, we passed the first alkali springs that we saw on our journey, but they were not the last. On the 21st, we reached the Sweetwater, a swift-running stream, but fordable, which we followed to its very source in the Rocky Mountains. We met several ox teams from Salt Lake, bound for the States to assist the Mormon immigration. We passed Independence Rock, another celebrated landmark, noted for its great size. It covers several acres, and rises to a great height, and is covered with the names of passing emigrants. Two mountain sheep were killed and brought into camp, furnishing all with a most delicious meal.

On the 23rd we passed Devil's Gate; the name is suggestive. It is the passage of the Sweetwater through a deep cut in the solid rock. The river is about 75 feet wide on an average, but as it approaches the rocks which rise 400 feet, perpendicularly, on each side, it is compressed into half that width, and rushes through the narrow space a foaming cataract.

Sunday, May 26th, we encountered snow and sleet the whole day, and traveling with overcoats was the most comfortable way of spending the Sabbath. We were all the day traveling far up in the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains.

When we reached the top, it did not seem as if we were on the summit of the great divide between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, for we were in an extensive valley, nearly level, several miles in width and thirty in length. Its altitude is 6085 feet. As we came out on the western side next morning, where the waters run to the Pacific, and raised our eyes to the lofty chain of mountains on the right and gazed on their summits, still thousands of feet above us, and the countless glaciers sparkling in the sunbeams, the scene was grand beyond description. The first night after leaving the Pass, we reached Pacific Springs. A pony turned out to graze with a halter about its neck, became entangled and was cast; before morning the

wolves actually ate him alive. The next day we traveled 30 miles over a sandy desert all the way to Black Fork, a small stream usually fordable, but now greatly swollen by the melting snow on the mountains. The Mormons had a small ferry established here, but as many were already waiting for a passage, and the price was exorbitant, we thought best to establish an opposition. So, calking one of our wagon boxes, we transported our loading, pulling our boat back and forth by a rope, swam the horses and drew our wagon across by hand, all at the expense of three hours' time. Others profiting by our example, reduced somewhat the receipts of the Mormon ferry. Here we found an encampment of friendly Indians, but we did not learn to what tribe they belonged. We were told by friends along the road that a few days before a young man from a western State, while camping here, made the acquaintance of these Indians to such an extent that he married one of the good-looking young squaws; at least the Indians so considered it as far as they were concerned, and were well pleased with the idea of one of their tribe being chosen by a pale-face. Next morning when his company was ready for a start, the young woman was on hand with her dowry, consisting of a camp kettle, a skillet and some few other traps suitable for Indian housekeeping, and insisted on going with him to California. The indiscreet young man was in a fix, and a bad one, too, for the Indians insisted that she was his wife, according to their customs, and he must take her along. That, of course, was impossible, for his company would not consent to it, even if he was so disposed, which he was not. To say the least, there was one fellow badly scared. To get out of a bad scrape and pacify the Indians, cost him his riding pony and all the money he had.

Our company, which numbered 45 wagons at the starting point, and 15 when we left Fort Laramie, has continued to decrease, some going ahead, others falling behind, till now it is reduced to four.

June 1st we met a large number of Snake Indians with a big herd of cattle and horses. Passed Fort Bridger, and for two days had a difficult road, following up a canyon crossing the stream back and forth many times, the water frequently coming to the top of our wagon box. On either side were bluffs, 300 to 400 feet high, in many places leaving us barely room for a wagon road. Some emigrants had established a ferry, composed of six cedar logs for a raft, and charged \$3 to transport each wagon and the men. We dared not to attempt to cross

in our frail boat, for the river was 150 feet wide, with a rapid current. When in midstream, on account of not being properly balanced, one end of the raft began to sink, and before reaching shore was a foot under water.

June 6th we reached Salt Lake City, where we remained nearly two days. As no rain falls here during the summer months, the farmers resort to irrigation. The city is located three miles from the foot of the mountains on the river Jordan, the outlet of Lake Utah, and 22 miles from Great Salt Lake. It is handsomely and well laid out. Salt Lake is a beautiful sheet of water, whose specific gravity is so great, being strongly impregnated with salt as to buoy almost every object upon its surface. It is almost impossible to sink in it, and it is a great bathing resort. Vast quantities of saline matter are cast upon the shore every autumn, and the moisture retained in the deposit evaporates during the next summer, leaving a bank of the purest white salt, which may be shoveled up by the ton. In the center of the lake is a large island that towers up mountain high, and from its sides gush out the purest springs of fresh water. There the Mormons have vast herds of fine cattle, and this mountain island is the shepherd's home.

Just north of the city is a spring 60 feet in diameter, strongly impregnated with salt and sulphur, said to contain medicinal qualities, with a temperature above blood heat. The Mormons are preparing to pipe it into the city. The weather is delightful, so mild in winter that the cattle, which are suffered to run at large, thrive well and are fat in the spring, and yet the mountains, whose base is but three miles distant, have their summits covered with perpetual snow.

We became acquainted with a young man by name of Davis, from Wisconsin, who told us he had an uncle who moved to Utah with his family three years before, when the Mormons first settled here, but he was no polygamist, and he would like very much to find his uncle and aunt. We met him again a few weeks later, out on the desert. He said he called on his uncle a few miles out of the city, and found him living in perfect happiness, apparently, with three wives. The distance from Fort Laramie to this point is 509 miles, and 1031 from the Missouri river, about one-half of our journey over.

Instead of finding the Black Hills and Rocky Mountains covered with timber, as we expected, we found them entirely destitute of trees of any kind. Greasewood served as fuel for many miles. Having purchased a guide book describing the

route to Sacramento, and tarried with the Mormons a day and a half, we again started on our western journey, June 8th. We found settlements along the road for 20 miles, and reached the second crossing of Bear river on the 11th, swam our horses and paid \$5 for wagon on a Mormon ferry. For several days nothing occurred worthy of note. Some days our road was good, on others bad—very bad. Some days we found both feed and water, other days we found neither.

On the 18th of June we were at Cold-Water Creek, in Thousand-Spring Valley.

The prairie dog villages are a real curiosity. We have passed through several of them, each covering several acres, and each hole inhabited by a curious combination, consisting of the dog and a small owl and a rattlesnake. We saw many of the dogs and owls enter the holes together, but the rattlesnakes did not show themselves. Sunday, the 23rd, we laid by, and not less than a hundred wagons passed us, with five times that number of men, from whose hearts "the root of all evil," or the love of it, had for the time being absorbed their love of ease, of friends and even social comfort. The 27th, we encamped on the banks of the Humboldt, which stream we found unusually high, being on an average 75 feet wide, 8 to 10 feet deep, with a swift current. Crossed over in our wagon-box-boat, swimming the horses. We found the bottom land adjacent to the river where the Mormon trail ran, overflowed to such an extent we were compelled to keep along the bluffs on higher ground. We had learned our route would be down the Humboldt to the sink, where the river loses itself in the sands of the desert. But of the distance we had little knowledge.

After a day's travel, we were told here was the place to prepare our hay for crossing the desert, which we would reach after 18 miles' travel. But, to our utter dismay, no grass was to be found without wading into the marsh knee deep for nearly half a mile. We had learned long before this that an overland journey to California was not in all respects a pleasure excursion, but, like every other means to the accomplishment of a desirable end, it was attended with some labor and sacrifice. So we spent the afternoon and the next day in cutting grass with a scythe, when we could borrow one, otherwise with our belt knives, packing it out on our backs, drying and sacking it for an early start the following morning. At 12 o'clock we were roused by the guard, and in less than an hour were on the move in high hopes of soon reaching and passing that 40

miles of barren sand and no water, so much dreaded by all emigrants. We goaded ourselves on after the first few hours, till the sun had climbed into the mid-heavens, having traveled 25 miles, but no desert yet. During the afternoon we again waded the marsh for fresh grass that the horses might eat during the night. Next morning the rising sun found us ready to resume our journey, expecting every hour to have a view of the desert. Thus we passed on till 10 o'clock, when we found a company preparing hay for the desert, who assured us it was 80 miles ahead. "Never fret" had been our motto, so now we made up our minds to take it easy as circumstances would permit. During the day we passed many dead horses and tenantless wagons; saw clothing, tools of every description and many other articles too numerous to mention, strewn along the road, which nobody wanted. At night those of our company who could swim crossed the river and brought back grass on their backs for the horses. We had all read about the "Jersey Mosquitoes," but if they are larger, or more numerous, or bloodthirsty than those we met on the Humboldt, I have no wish to see them. They actually shut off the rays of the sun.

July 1st we had a general consultation as to the best method of getting to the golden land. On leaving the Missouri, it was supposed we had provisions for 100 days. Although we added somewhat to our stock at Salt Lake, it was found that what we had would not serve us more than ten days, and we are 300 miles from California, the worst part of our journey before us and our teams nearly exhausted. Shall we take our wagon across the desert and over the mountains, consequently protracting our journey several days, or shall we leave our wagon and things we can best part with, and pack our horses with what is essential, and make all possible dispatch? To the latter proposition we all agreed, and it was done with the greatest unanimity, because all our neighbors were reduced to the same extremities with ourselves, and neither love nor money could obtain provisions. Next day we came to the forks of the road, the right being an old trail to Oregon, made by trappers years ago. This was the road taken by so many unfortunate emigrants last season, who perished in the mountains. About 100 teams, by mistake, took the same road this year, and among them were some who left Missouri with us. After traveling six or eight days across the desert and up into the mountains, they discovered their mistake. Some returned almost famished; others struck out for a settlement in Oregon, 400 miles distant, with what success we never heard.

The 4th of July was celebrated by our second attempt in preparing for the desert crossing. It was a repetition of our former effort—wading knee deep across the Humboldt bottoms, cutting grass with our knives, and packing it on our backs half a mile away. The next day we came in sight of the long looked for desert, and the sink of the Humboldt. This river, anlong whose banks we had been traveling for the last 300 miles, entirely disappears and is lost to sight, if not to memory. The water was thoroughly saturated with alkali, and has proved very destructive to stock, both cattle and horses. Here, too, we found the “Sulphur Spring” spoken of in most of the guide books, that has caused the death of so many horses, and the sickness of many emigrants. We had received warning of its ill effects, and profited thereby.

Our stock is now reduced to four horses; the other four having been left at different points along the road to the tender mercies of the Indians. The big company to which we once belonged has entirely vanished. At 4 o'clock p. m. we started out across the desert for 15 miles, where we were to leave the wagon. We had no difficulty in getting fuel to cook our last meal with the wagon; by placing the camp-kettle on the hub of one of the wheels and filling in around it among the spokes portion of the wagon box, we soon had a rousing fire. The night was cool and pleasant, far more so than if we had crossed in the day time. At sunrise we struck the heavy sand, where we found water for sale at one dollar per gallon. The next ten miles was through loose sand, ankle deep, to the Carson river. Pure, cold water never looked better, and we all made good use of a liberal portion. We passed many horses, both dead and dying, and hundreds of wagons abandoned by owners. We have been able to walk from 20 to 30 miles each day, and found it no great hardship. Out of the nearly 2000 miles, we have made at least 1500 on foot. No one rode but the driver and the sick. But the hard part was standing guard at night, when one wanted to sleep, but was not allowed to do so. One night I went on at dusk, taking the horses a short distance where a little bunch grass was found here and there, and was to be relieved at 12 o'clock. I sat down by the side of a big rock, in full view of the horses and the plains for a long distance, and drew around me the blanket I had brought from home, for the night was chilly. I had no thoughts of sleep, but alas! I did fall asleep, and when I awoke 20 minutes later, not a horse was in sight. I went direct to camp, told the boys the horses were

all gone—for I supposed they had been stolen—told them to charge it up to me, and I would settle, if ever able. But they said, "We will help you find them," which they did in a half hour's time, where they had found better feed. Any one who has traveled "the plains across" will admit that on this trip is a good place for the display of human nature. I saw many wordy quarrels among the members of other private companies, but I will say for all five of us, we never had any disputes or differences that were not settled on the spot at the time, and to the satisfaction of all. At the base of the mountains was a trading post recently established, where we replenished our short stock of provisions with flour and sugar at \$2 per pound and fresh beef at \$1. From the 9th to the 14th of July we were crossing the Sierra Nevada mountains, which we found heavily timbered. Snow covered both hill and valley for twenty miles, with a few exceptions of the latter, and on the 13th we encamped in a deep mountain gorge; the frost was severe and the water was frozen in our camp kettle. On the 15th we arrived at Hangtown, now called Placerville, 83 days after leaving the Missouri river, and our journey was at an end.